THE BATTLE OF MALDON: EVIDENCE OF THE MOVE AWAY FROM EPIC HEROISM

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by

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ABSTRACT

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The Battle of Maldon is a poem of change, a pivot point in the English literary tradition. It lies between Beowulf and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, both in time and in intent. The Maldon poet created finely interrelated philosophic and social commentary in his poem, playing the epic hero against the newer Christian martyr. He used both characterizations to create a picture of Byrhtnoth as a political martyr. With some understanding of the historical and religious perspectives of tenth century England, it is possible to begin to appreciate The Battle of Maldon and to understand its pivotal role in artistic evolution. The poet integrated disparate ideas to produce an Anglo-Saxon work of surprising complexity that has survived for one thousand years.

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Chapter One

Introduction

The Germanic code of the hero is straightforward and exemplified by two modern cliches: "all for one and one for all," and "with your shield or on it." The heroic code, as in Beowulf, is based on the assumption that immortality is in the memories of the people immediate to the warrior. But by the time of the Pearl poet's Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, the warrior's struggle lies in an attempt to acquire humility, and therefore the immortality promised by the Christian church.

When and where this change took place is difficult if not impossible to pinpoint, but a careful reading of the tenth century poem The Battle of Maldon shows the beginnings of a change. There are heated debates over Maldon; debates that can be settled if one considers the poem as a pivotal moment in English literature.

The ongoing debates concerning this poem fall roughly into three categories: the historical veracity of Maldon, the question of the poem's Christianity, and the combined problem of Byrhtnoth's motivation and the poet's attitude toward his actions. Margaret Ashdown's theory is that no participant in

the battle itself would have written the poem "since no one would wish to advertise his own survival, 'lordless'" (293). George Clark, in "The Battle of Maldon: A Heroic Poem" says that "not a word in the poem supports the notion that any Englishman present at the battle could survive it with honor" (55). John C. Pope claims that the poem is "not in historical perspective; rather [it is] a self-contained little tragedy" (71). Earl R. Anderson succinctly states, "Maldon must be regarded primarily as the work of a poetic imagination" (248). On the other hand, O. D. Macrae-Gibson feels "the principle of economy of hypothesis may still fairly be invoked to suggest that the more detailed description should also be held historical unless there is clear evidence to the contrary" (89). J.B. Goedhals agrees generally with this and M. A. L Locherbie-Cameron says, in "Byrhtnoth, His Noble Companion and His Sister's Son," "if the poem is a substantially accurate report . . . it is likely to have been written soon after the event" (159). E. V. Gordon dismisses Ashdown and Clark's theory when he says:

> The poem is the important record of the battle: it is the only detailed account, and , except for the brief notice in Chronicles CDEF under 991, it is the only one that is generally trustworthy. . . . The author was probably a monk of Ramsey, and as a contemporary residing in a monastery where Byrhtnoth was personally known and respected, he should have been well informed about Byrhtnoth and his fate. (5-6)

Whether the poem is, in its sequencing and actions, historically accurate is neither critical to nor necessary for

the appreciation of the poem. The historical veracity of The Battle of Maldon has to be considered in light of England in the late tenth century. The battle, a historical fact, was a very minor action. The weight the poet gives this minor action, in itself, indicates the exercising of his poetic license. The poet took the bare fact of this historical incident and created a political statement. Thus the historical basis necessary for the understanding of the poem is the "big picture," that is, recognition of the historical perspective of the poet when he created it--with a medieval writer's love of convoluted interplay--to become England's first political cartoon.

The second bone of contention is the question of the poem's Christianity. Morton W. Bloomfield says "the whole episode is presented strongly in terms of God's power" (546). N.F. Blake compares "Maldon with AElfric's vita of St. Edmund" (333). Richard Hillman states that "the 'Maldon' poet . . . uses a developing pattern of Christian allusions to portray a glorious triumph emerging from what may indeed be, in worldly terms, a cased of bungled generalship" (386). Cecily Clark, on the other hand, says "the poet could not deny his hero's Christianity . . . but the slightness and vagueness of his references to it compel us to the conclusion that he was playing it down" (292). Instead of these somewhat limited arguments, the poet's attitude toward the entire episode must be considered. His "world view" comes from Christian ideals

so basic to us now that they would be as difficult to recognize as a fish recognizing water.

The third and most vociferous battleground revolves around the confusion over Byrhtnoth's motivation and the poet's opinion of his actions. Warren A. Samouce negates the historical and Christian aspects of battle by saying Maldon "has achieved greatness through being primarily not a poem of battle, but a poem of heroism" (129). C. M. Bowra justifies Byrhtnoth's actions and the poet's attitude:

> The usual cause of such decisions [Byrhtnoth's decision to allow the Vikings across the water] is the hero's pride, which forbids him to take any course which he thinks dishonourable or below his dignity. His high spirit drives him on, and so, when disaster follows, it seems inevitable and almost appropriate. Such is the case in Maldon. (122)

Tolkien, however, leads in the theory that Byrhtnoth suffered from "ofermōd" (overwhelming pride) and the poet intended to criticize him. "So far as the fragment of his work goes, the poet . . . did not elaborate the point [of "ofermōd"]; though if the poem had [an] ending . . . it was probably resumed" (16). Zacharias Thundyil, with a broader view of the poem, says "the poet . . . recognizes that the destruction of the English army is the result not only of Byrhtnoth's ofermōd but also of a flawed ideal of the heroic society" (151).

"Despite the fairly extensive discussion of the poem . . . one comes away from the critical literature with the impression that in certain respects the critical problems

which the poem presents have yet to be fully defined" (Hill 291). C. S. Lewis, in his discussion of the organizational methods of the Medieval writer said:

> All the apparent contradictions must be harmonized. A Model must be built which will get everything in without a clash; and it can do this only by becoming intricate, by mediating its unity through a great, and finely ordered, multiplicity. (11)

Therefore, it is my belief that the poet integrated these different ideas, purposely and naturally, with the intention of presenting the changes coming over his world. One need only look at the poem while understanding the poet's probable love of complexities to realize that The Battle of Maldon is pivotal in English art, moving from the epic heroic standpoint toward what will be the more introspective struggles of a Sir Gawain.

One must first, however, consider the old art form and the social conditions of the tenth century to understand the amazing cohesiveness and complexity in The Battle of Maldon.

Chapter Two

The Old Tradition of Epic Heroism and *Maldon*

The Battle of Maldon has long been considered the last great heroic poem in Old English literature. Here, for the last time, the comitatus and the lord face defeat and death with honor, each upholding his rightful position in an ancient tradition. Byrhtnoth fights nobly, refusing Danegeld to the Vikings, refusing the questionable method of holding his position and massacring the invaders, standing tall in the face of carrion-eating animals, and encouraging his men through his words and actions. His comitatus acts in an appropriate manner in battle by standing by Byrhtnoth in a deadly situation, by making their actions suit the boasts given at Byrhtnoth's table, and by dying one by one as their lord has died.

C. M. Bowra in *Heroic Poetry* says:

> If [heroic poetry] has a central principle it is that the great man must pass through an ordeal to prove his worth and this is almost necessarily some kind of violent action, which not only demands courage, endurance, and enterprise, but, since it involves the risk of life, makes him show to what lengths he is prepared to go in pursuit of honour. For this reason heroic poetry may be concerned with any action in which *a man stakes his life on his ideal of what he ought to be*. (31) (emphasis added)

Since this is Byrhtnoth's probable justification for his actions, his behavior reflects the proper conduct for a hero. The ancient concept of the hero cannot be properly displayed without the imminence of death. Byrhtnoth, in order to display and support this heroic posture, had to modify the situation as it initially stood that day in 991. The English had the advantage of position. The Vikings were on an island and forced to cross in small, easily attacked numbers. If Byrhtnoth had maintained his position, the Vikings would not have won the battle. They would either have been slaughtered one by one as they crossed the causeway, or departed, taking to their boats. By the standards of old heroism, these were not acceptable alternatives for Byrhtnoth. "Of course, heroes may disregard the ritual norms and win in any way they can, by hook or by crook. Such victories . . . do not reap honor in the same way" (Parks 55). The hero must face death, and Bryhtnoth's position offered him relative safety. In order to fulfill his (or the poet's) anachronistic view of success, he must give ground and allow the Vikings across the causeway unimpeded, to fight "fairly," face to face. Accordingly, "what his men hear him do is actually <u>invite</u> (request) the Vikings to come across . . . that is, to perform [an act] of defensive aggression that [is] in accordance with the rules of Anglo-Saxon society" (Nelson 141).

The poet is anachronistic in his ideas, his word choice, and his poetic style. Here in Maldon the earl, Byrhtnoth, and

his chosen men are motivated by the older concept of personal glory. "In fighting for their country the men of Maldon are moved by a truly heroic spirit and act in accordance with its immemorial rules. In them the group shows the old pride of the individual and reveals that it knows what is expected" (Bowra 113). Each of the poet's main characters speaks in turn, reaffirming his boasts made at Byrhtnoth's table. The acts of this reaffirmation could have come straight out of Beowulf.

> I remember the time, as we drank in the mead-hall,
> When we swore to our lord who bestowed these rings
> That we would repay for the war-gear and armor,
> The hard swords and helmets, if need like this
> Should ever befall him. (Trapp 87 lines 2487-91)

The code of conduct displayed by these men strongly resembles the heroic behavior found in the Germania, where Tacitus says:

> When they go into battle, it is a disgrace for the chief to be surpassed in valour, a disgrace for his followers not to equal the valour of the chief. And it is an infamy and a reproach for life to have survived the chief, and returned from the field. To defend, to protect him, to ascribe one's own brave deeds to his renown, is the height of loyalty. The chief fights for victory; his vassals fight for their chief. (Church 715-716)

Though it has long been thought that the ideals of heroism remained consistent from the time of Tacitus to the time of this battle, this is more likely an affectation of Old English poetry. "Whilst the society of the tribes in first-century Germany had to be firmly distinguished from that of the Anglo-Saxons in tenth century England, Old English poetry

archaically preserved some of the ideals of conduct that characterized a much earlier form of society" (Woolf 63). Early Germanic society and the poetry that arose from this society "attached enormous importance to individual prowess, individual pride, and individual reputation" (Thundyil 51). The prime motivation at this time was the avoidance of shame, giving, therefore, a negative rather than a positive reason for the actions of the heroic individual. Byrhtnoth, in his heroic display, is primarily motivated by this avoidance of shame, therefore is a good example of Germanic heroism.

The Maldon poet continues his anachronistic approach by exploring three key concepts of early Germanic heroism: purpose or courage, frith, and trēow. The purpose of the early hero was, if a warrior, to serve his lord, and if a lord, to lead his warriors in the name of his king. Ultimately, the purpose of all heroes was to face death with honor thus making purpose and courage synonymous. Frith, sometimes translated as peace, more likely "signified the inviolable bond emphasizing harmony and alliance between kinsmen" (Thundyil 54). He also presents the ideal of trēow "which may be explained as fealty, oath keeping, or allegiance" (Thundyil 57). The poet approached the ideas of frith and trēow with the individuals in Byrhtnoth's comitatus. All the characters, though they may have been historically accurate characters, fill an aspect of Germanic kindred. There is Wulfmaer, Byrhtnoth's sister's son, a critical

relationship for the old families. There was "an especially close tie between a man and his sister's son--a tie as close as that between father and son" (Trapp 23). Offa, a warrior with some form of foresight, is what may be Byrhtnoth's alter self. AElfwine, Lēofsunu, and AEtherīc speak, reaffirming their dedication to the eorl as proper members of a comitatus, and the hostage AEscferth speaks nobly of staying his ground in the upcoming battle. The poet even includes Dunnere, a simple freeman, and puts the famous words of heroic tenacity into the mouth of old Byrhtwold: "Hige sceal pē heardra, heorte pē cēnre, mōd sceal pē māre pe ūre maegen lȳtlath" [Courage must be the stronger, heart the braver, mind (spirit) must be greater as our strength lessens.] (lines 312-13) All these warriors express facets of Germanic frith and trēow, but both ideals are even more solidly portrayed by their absence in the behavior of Odda's sons Godrīc, Godrinc, and Godwy. They rode away from the battle, Godrīc on Byrhtnoth's horse, after their lord had fallen. In this single act, Odda's sons exemplified all that is "anti-heroic" in the Germanic tradition. They ran from the battle when it is the warrior's place to stand with his lord. They took the earl's horse when it is the lord's place to give as he saw fit. Not only did their cowardice cost the comitatus their presence, but the lesser trained individuals in Byrhtnoth's troop saw the horse, assumed it was Byrhtnoth, and broke the shield wall. This last was the ultimate disgrace as it maligned Byrhtnoth's good

name--it damaged the very immortality for which Byrhtnoth died.

Along with his anachronistic ideas, the Maldon poet shows archaic tendencies in his word choice. The older Anglo-Saxon poets, because they created oral poetry, relied on certain formulae.

> The unlettered singer, ordinarily composing rapidly and extempore before a live audience, must and does call upon ready-made language, upon a vast reservoir of formulas filling just measures of verse. These formulas develop over a long period of time; they are the creation of countless generations of singers and can express all the ideas a singer will need in order to tell his story, itself usually traditional. (Magoun 189)

These formulae were usually half-lines of double alliteration that could "be altered to suit different needs, and then, without much trouble, completed with a second half-line" (Bowra 242). The Maldon poet, with these formulaic half-lines, created the anachronistic effect of an older epic poem, as in line 13 "gār tō gūpe" or line 237 "gār and gōd swurd." These lines and others were originally useful because they could be easily changed to suit the poet's immediate needs. Not only did the Maldon poet use these "stock" lines, he used compounds, or "kennings" also. The earlier, oral poets, depended on the versatility of synonyms, kennings, that could be varied to produce the proper alliteration.

> To help provide the many synonyms beginning with different letters which were essential for the scop (poet) working in the alliterative measure, the Anglo-Saxon poets made great use of compounds. Of special interest is the kenning, a sort of condensed metaphor in which (a) is compared to (b) without (a)

> or the point of the comparison being made explicit. . . .We find too that many set phrases inherited from the days when the poetry was composed orally survive in the lettered poetry. These 'oral-formulae' are set metrical combinations which could be varied according to the needs of alliteration. (Mitchell 57)

By the time of the Maldon poet the kennings "are of a stereotyped nature" (Laborde 73). The color and style of earlier kennings are not in Maldon but some of the effect can be seen in such phrases as "lagustrēamas" [sea stream or tide] (line 66), "fāersceathan" [sudden foe] (line 142), "hringlocan" [ring locker, or chain mail] (line 145), "helsceathan" [hell scather or fiend] (line 180), and "bēahgifan" [ring giver] (line 290). To call Bryhtnoth a 'ring giver' was to "codify him according to one of the two complementary fundamental actions society had traditionally recognized in personal leadership" (Clemoes 7-8), that of the gift-giving lord. The other action fundamental to a good leader was seeking out battle.

The poet's poetic style is the final anachronistic element in Maldon. The poem "is dressed both in the rhetoric and the conventions of the literary tradition of heroism" (Gatch 134). One of the most interesting of these conventions is the flyting between Byrhtnoth and the Viking messenger. The flyting, a "verbal contest in which rival heroes exchange insults and boasts" (Parks 292), highlights the vast difference in attitude between the eorl and the Viking. The

messenger is almost businesslike in his offer to accept Danegeld rather than fight.

> Mē sendon tō pē sāēmen snelle,
> hēton thē secgan paet pū mōst sendan rathe
> bēagas with gebeorge; and ēow betere is
> paet gē pisne gārrāēs; mid gafole forgyldon
> pon wē swā hearde hilde daēlon.
> Ne purfe wē uš spillan, gif gē spēdap tō pām. (ll. 29-34)

"The aristocratic Byrhtnoth brandishes his spear like a Beowulfian hero and responds with sarcasm, offering them spears and swords in place of tribute" (Swanton 169). His speech one of magnificent irony and grandeur, that the poet emphasizes with use of alliteration--both assonance and consonance. As he spoke, Byrhtnoth became larger than life, both "yrre and ānraēd" [angry and resolute] (44).

> sege pīnum lēodum miccle lāpre spell,
> paer hēr stynt unforcūth eorl mid his werode,
> pe wile gealgean ēpel pysne,
> AEpelredes eard, ealdres mīnes
> floc and foldan; feallan sceolon
> haēpene aet hilde! Tō heanlic mē pinceth
> paet gē mid ūrum sceattum tō scype gangon
> unbegohtene, nū gē pus feor hider
> on ūrne eard in becōmon.
> Ne sceole gē swā sōfte sinc gegangan;
> us sceal ord and ecg aēr gesēman,
> grim gūthplega, aēr wē gofol syllon. (50-61)

The sounds of "Ne sceole gē swā sōfte sinc gegamam" [not shall you easily treasure get hold of] and "feallan sceolon haēpene aet hilde! Tō heanlic mē pinceth" [fall shall heathens in battle! Too humiliating to me seems] (54-55) give considerable artistic impact to Byrhtnoth's mighty stand against the invader's spokesman. And as he spoke "yrre and

ānraēd, āgeaf him andsware:" (line 44) the pride of the English people stood with him (all emphasis added). Maldon more than makes up for its lack of kennings in the rolling speeches of this glorious man.

Another traditional aspect of Maldon is the carrion animals that await the dead, in this case ravens and eagles. "In that place came to be outcry raised up, ravens circled, eagles carrion eager" (106-07). The Maldon poet also uses the traditional relationship of uncle and nephew to give added impact to the impending death of Wulfmaēr. "Wounded was Wulfmaēr, slaughter-bed chose, kinsman of Byrhtnoth: he with swords was his sister's son fiercely cut down" (113-15). And, "if the attitude of Beowulf's cowardly retainers during the hero's last battle with the dragon can be taken as a likely element of other such tales, even the motif of faithlessness may be conventional" (Gatch 134). Thus Godric and his brothers, in their flight on Byrhtnoth's horses, fill a traditional role for the poet. Another, more esoteric example of poetic tradition, known as 'hero on the beach' and found throughout Beowulf, is in Maldon. This tradition is called "'hero on the beach' even when there is no beach in sight and in which a hero at the outset or conclusion of a journey, in the vicinity of some of his own people, stands at the juncture between two elements in the presence of something which shines" (Renoir 71). In Beowulf, after the first mention of something shining: "The ship sped on, till the next

day's sun Showed sea-cliffs shining, towering hills" (lines 218-19) (emphasis added) there are "twelve different mentions of various shining objects" (Renoir 73). The Maldon poet uses this archaic tradition in line 98 when the Vikings "across the shining water shields carried" (emphasis added). "The theme of the Hero on the Beach frequently precedes a description of (or reference to) a scene of carnage" (Crowne 372). Byrhtnoth has here made his fateful decision to allow the opposing force over the causeway, giving up his advantageous position.

The Maldon poet's use of conventional aspects of Old English heroic poetry--ideas, language, and style--present certain of Byrhtnoth's actions in an anachronistic light, but Byrhtnoth shines in this light.

> A chief problem of the poem, M. J. Swanton has argued, is that most of these conventional details are anachronistic. [emphasis added] The details of heroic life do not fit the facts of life in the kingdom of AEthelred; and when one recognizes this fact, "the whole is seen to have been built upon false foundations, a travesty of antique heroic values" (Swanton quoted in Gatch 135).

It seems likely, though, that this juxtaposition of values, modern versus antique, may have been quite deliberate. Consider next the state of affairs in tenth century England.

Chapter Three

Political and Religious Aspects of Tenth Century England

The tenth century, starting just after the death of Alfred, had an auspicious beginning. Alfred's reign had given Britain cohesiveness. Witness the entry for the year 889 in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles: "The same year, King Alfred occupied the city of London, and all the English turned to him, except those who were in the captivity of the Danes" (Savage 98). For the first time, the various British people were referred to as English, rather than Northumbrian or Mercian.

> Alfred knew, [though], that is was up to him to salvage all that was best and enduring from the wreckage created by the Danish onslaughts. He had no intention of jeopardizing the new stirring of English unity by marching roughshod over regional tradition, or of proclaiming a strange new era in England (Humble 57).

So, with great care, he balanced the disparate elements of this developing "England."

The Viking raids, which were first recorded in 789, had changed by 866. This was the year in which the Great Army of the Danes began its attacks. No longer merely seeking plunder, the attacks were "bent on conquest" (Humble 41). "Over the next seven years, the Great Army demonstrated the

fatal inability of the Saxon kingdoms to achieve a common defence policy with prompt and effective mutual aid" (Humble 48). So Alfred (and his successors) were faced with the dual problem of pacifying the diverse sections of "England," which, despite the beginnings of nationalism, was still a very real problem, and, just as importantly, fending off the Vikings.

In 886, he drew up a treaty with the Danes which protected both the English people and those Danes now settled in eastern Britain in an area that was called the 'Danelaw'. Alfred left Britain with a framework of laws "drawn up to meet the needs of Englishmen from all parts of the country . . .and as such, it was the starting point for all legislating kings of England which followed Alfred" (Humble 60).

Between the years of 900 and 959 Alfred's descendants moved Britain forward to achieve a "golden age" during, though not because of, the rule of Edgar the Peaceable. Furthermore, it was not until Edward the Elder, Alfred's son, came to the throne that England was first truly considered one kingdom and Edward called "King of England." In turn, Edward's sons, Athelstan and Edmund reigned from 924 to 939 and 939 to 946, respectively. Athelstan ruled in the tradition of his father and grandfather. "However, it was Athelstan's personal <u>style</u> of kingship that ranked him head and shoulders above them . . . Athelstan gave the raw new English kingdom an aura which it badly needed" (Humble 90). His brother Edmund, however, is remembered for participating in the battle of

Brunanburh and for "launching the carrier of one of the most influential churchmen in English history when he appointed Dunstan Abbot of Glastonbury in 943" (Humble 107). Edmund the Elder's youngest son, Eadred ruled from 946 to 955 during which he brought England into a time of peace. Edmund's son Eadwig reigned for a short time and is unfortunately remembered primarily for leaving his coronation feast. Here, the story goes, Dunstan was forced to come looking for the new king, to pull him away from unsuitable behavior with a noblewoman and her daughter, and to make him come back to his feast. Publicly humiliated by Abbot Dunstan, he forced Dunstan to leave the country. By 959, in newly peaceful times, Edward's grandson, Edgar, had the good fortune to rule. Though his timing was lucky, he proved to be a good steward and chose his advisors well, something that cannot be said of his son AEthelred.

Realistically, the political temperament of the tenth century cannot be separated from the religious and social developments taking place at the same time. The monastic order of eastern England had suffered drastic losses in the ninth century.

> There can be no question that the Danish invasions of the ninth century shattered the organization of the English church, destroyed monastic life in eastern England, and elsewhere caused distress and anxiety which made the pursuit of learning almost impossible . . . Throughout England the Danish raids meant, if not the destruction, at least the grievous impoverishment of civilization. (Stenton 433)

But because it was not the heathen religion of the invaders that threatened the Church so much as "the lack of any provision for a regular supply of clergy" (Stenton 434), Alfred was able to save Christianity in England.

He was astute enough to recognize the degeneration of English religion and culture in the time since the Conversion. His efforts to revive English culture were both widespread and simply put: he sought to eradicate the decay of the old ideas. "It was the fact that the clergy, who should have rescued the nation from a relapse into half-heathen barbarism, were themselves too ignorant and too lacking in ideals to fulfil their proper functions" (Hodgkin 612). Alfred sought to re-educate the educators, "to reform his subjects by direct governmental action, that is, by punishing immorality and by establishing new monasteries (Hodgkin 612). Although he established few monasteries, Alfred had more success in secular areas. His laws offered a base for cultural and religious re-organization. "The fundamental problem of the age was that of order" (Hodgkin 603). Alfred gave England the beginnings of that order.

> Alfred, unlike Charlemagne, was successful in implementing his ideas because his authority was not vested in the Church but in the nobles and people whom he valiantly led against the Vikings. His success endured because he used the Viking threat to the advantage of his dynasty. (Hodges 194)

He also gave this new "English" culture a boost. By promoting the translation of great continental works into Old English

he established the foundations of a new culture for a new people able for the first time to read such works as Boethius's Consolation of Philosophy.

Alfred's successors, by controlling and expanding the newly "national" England, gave the church a firmer political base. It was not until the time of Edmund, however, that "three men of outstanding ability . . . gave fresh life to a Church brought almost to the point of exhaustion by its long period of suffering" (Blair 173). These three men were Dunstan, AEthelwold, and Oswald. It was through the efforts of these men that the monastic movement, in the Benedictine Rule, grew.

The concept of Benedictine monasticism, with its emphasis on poverty, humility, and obedience was an enormous change for the pre-revival church in England. The extant church had devolved to what was, in most cases, a variation on secular dominance, and power was its people's goal. With the new push for religious piety, there was a change in secular and religious concepts of success. The idea of rewards coming in a real, though transcendent afterlife began to change the old English attributes of goodness. Christianity was becoming more intrinsic and the precepts of Christianity were blurring the stature of individuals with a growing acceptance of an afterlife. It was no longer a necessity to make a name for one's self among one's contemporaries in order to achieve immortality. It was, in fact, more appropriate to behave in

"proper" Christian form and expect one's reward, one's immortality after death, in heaven.

The lower classes were faced with dual change. The hamlet-type society was evolving into a more nationalistic way of life. The old religions heretofore merged with post-Conversion Christianity were fading with the greater socialization and with the push of monasticism. Another aspect of this dual change--feudalism--gained momentum in AEthelred's reign through the added economic pressures brought about by the repeated collection of Danegeld. The peasant farmer reached a point where he could no longer contribute his share and was forced to give himself and his land to a local landowner in exchange for his payment. (It was at this time that England started to become class conscious.)

The monastic movement "was slow and English in origin, but advanced with great strides from the middle of the century as it came in contact with the religious revival on the Continent" (Churchill 104). England did not, of course, exist in a vacuum. When Dunstan was exiled to the continent by King Eadwig "he went to Flanders where he found refuge at the newly reformed monastery at Ghent" (Blair 176). Oswald was sent to study the practices of Fleury, and AEthelwold sent one of his monks from Abingdon to Fleury. Thus a great deal of credit for monastic reform needs to be given to the examples of Ghent and Fleury.

> The importance of continental influences on the English movement is apparent at every stage in its

> development, from the time when Oda sent to Fleury for the habit to the presence of foreign monks at the Winchester synod. The procedure of the synod was modelled closely on that at Aachen in 817 and of the Concordia it has been remarked that 'it was the normal use of western Europe, inherited in part from the traditions of Glastonbury and other English churches but chiefly through information and training received from Fleury and Ghent. (Fisher 293)

The Regulaus Concordia, written down at the synod by AEthelwold, was the "code of the new English observance" (Stenton 448) and was written to keep English monasticism within the Rule of St. Benedict. "The term . . . regula or rule. . .was used because these religious [communities] followed a common rule of life based on the observance of the three vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience" (Bokenkotter 156).

The re-establishment of monasticism was slow in England, because some of the lands held by the Church before the Viking incursions had been taken over by secular landowners. "The remaining large religious foundations were now served by communities of clerks who jealously guarded their possessions" (Fisher 285). The landowners needed the income from the acquired church properties to support armies against the Danes. It was only after King Edmund made Dunstan Abbot of Glastonbury that any true leverage was available for the movement. At Glastonbury, Dunstan was able to educate monks and send them to various parts of England to start new monasteries and rebuild old ones. His real chance came in 961

when King Edgar gave him the archbishopric at Canterbury. Edgar also made AEthelwold bishop of Winchester and Oswald archbishop of York. "Edgar, then, must be credited with making the fullest use of the galaxy of talent placed at his disposal by his own appointments and those of his predecessors" (Humble 118). It seems unfortunate that a king with such talent for choosing advisors should be followed almost immediately by a king like AEthelred II.

AEthelred Unraed came to the throne under the cloud of his brother's death. Edward, later called "the Martyr," was heartlessly murdered after a reign of only four years. Although AEthelred could hardly have been responsible since he was little more than a child at the time, suspicion hung about him through his long years as king. AEthelred had unlucky timing (to be king at this time, as much that happened was not his fault), poor judgement in his choice of advisors, and an erratic personality. In the 980's, because the Danes had recently had their supplies of silver cut off and because some were fleeing "an autocratic master [Swein] and an imposed religion" [Christianity] (Stenton 375) , their raids upon Britain had increased. "But [the fact that] the attacks were concentrated on Britain reflected the political weakness of England and Wales at a time when the Frankish lands and Ireland were less vulnerable to assault" (Fisher 301). It was not AEthelred's fault that the Danish raids resumed, "but the ineptitude of his government in dealing with them naturally

encouraged the raiders to continue their expeditions" (Fisher 301).

Another example of AEthelred's misfortune in being king at this time is the number of great men and good advisors who died during his reign: AEthelwold in 984, Dunstan in 988, Oswald in 992, AElfhere of Mercia in 983, Byrhtnoth of Essex in 991, and AEthelwine of East Anglia in 992. Unfortunately his unsound choice of new advisors amplified what would otherwise have been just bad luck.

> With Danish raiding continuing with unabated ferocity during the next twenty years the king's power of making appointments was more than ever crucial. Aethelred proved to be a poor judge of men, and though he sometimes showed the ability to make a just appreciation of political and military problems he lacked the steadfastness necessary to bring sound plans to a successful conclusion. Not only did he fail to select able and trustworthy subordinates but he was himself both arbitrary and inconstant. (Fisher 301)

Evidence of AEthelred's lack of judgment in at least one counselor shows up in The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records. In the entry for 983 Ealdorman AElfhere died and a certain AElfric took his place. In the entry for 985 "Ealdorman Aelfric was driven out of the land," but by 992 AElfric was back in England and warned the Danish force away, destroying England's potential victory. In 993, typical of AEthelred's irrational and volent nature, the King had AElfric's son Aelfgar blinded as revenge for his father's deceit, yet AElfrīc remained one of Aethelred's advisors. Another example of the King's disastrous choices is the man he chose to

replace Byrhtnoth. "Byrhtnoth's successor as ealdorman of Essex, Leofsige, negotiated with a Danish fleet and killed the king's high-reeve Aefic" (Fisher 303).

> The classic example of royal folly was the appointment of Eadric Streona to the ealdormanry of Mercia. When, in 1009, the Danes were cornered and eager to retreat to their ships and the English eager to attack, 'it was hindered by ealdorman Eadric, then as it always was.' (Fisher 304)

Aethelred's inability to choose advisors cost England a great deal over the next twenty years, but it was more complicated than just poor counselors, for "he was himself both arbitrary and inconstant" (Fisher 301). Obviously, a graphic example of this arbitrary nature was the blinding of AElfrīc's son as punishment for AElfrīc's disloyalty. AEthelred's arbitrary nature was further indicated by his continued maintenance of AElfrīc as an advisor--a man who always warned the Danes and always ran away. Another example occurred in 1002 when AEthelred broke a Danish truce bought with twenty-four thousand pounds.

> In their ruin and decay the English had taken large numbers of Danish mercenaries into their service. Ethelred suspected these dangerous helpers of a plot against his life. Panic-stricken, he planned the slaughter of all Danes in the south of England, whether in his pay or living peaceably on the land. This atrocious design was executed in 1002 on St. Brice's Day. Among the victims was Gunnhild, the wife of one of the principal Vikings, and sister of Sweyn, King of Denmark. Sweyn swore implacable revenge, and for two years executed it upon the wretched Islanders. (Churchill 107)

By the last quarter of the tenth century, changes had taken place within all major facets of English culture.

Politically, the country had nationalized; there was a single king and some geographical order in the form of the "Hundred Ordinance, which defined the duties of the basic territorial unit of the kingdom" (Humble 118). The church of England, affected by the collective growth of Christendom, had revived monasticism in the Benedictine manner spreading a new concept of proper Christian behavior, and expanding immortality beyond the old heroic notion of notoriety. Unfortunately, many of the changes that England and its people experienced were confusing, rather than constructive. AEthelred was hardly a good example of Christian doctrine or English nobility. His policy of paying Danegeld to the Vikings was extremely costly to his people, in far-reaching ways. The expenditure of money itself encouraged the development of a feudal society, and all the class consciousness inherent in feudalism. The old idea of heroism, a combination of pre-Christian and patriarchal Christian ideals was being dismantled by his lack of judgement and cowardice, and by the monastic movement. It was amidst this conglomerate of disparate ideals that the Maldon poet wrote his poem.

Chapter Four

Evidence of the Changing Attitudes in Maldon

There has been much debate over the Maldon poet's intentions in writing The Battle of Maldon. Superficially the poem appears contradictory and confusing. The poem is lauded as the last great work of epic heroism, yet epic heroism is an art form long past. Byrhtnoth is presented as a truly heroic leader, yet the poem revolves around the troubles his "ofermod" creates for himself and his men. The poem was written in the Christian age, but there is a great deal of debate over its overt Christianity. Maldon purports to represent a historical battle, yet how could this poem, full as it is of anachronisms, represent an actual battle? The poet's intentions in presenting these disparities are the object of continuing controversy. Maldon need only be examined in light of tenth century England to understand that, not only was the Maldon poet not confused, but he may have written one of the culture's best moral and philosophical studies of human nature in the throes of great change.

The Battle of Maldon is a heroic poem. Byrhtnoth stands as a hero of epic proportions--for the purpose of nostalgic comparison. The poet's anachronisms extend to Byrhtnoth

himself. The juxtaposing of contemporary warriors, that is, the very businesslike Vikings, and the old, glorious hero is made artistically evident in the poetry itself. The Viking spokesman for his unnamed partners speaks his piece in terse, generic tones. Byrhtnoth, however, roars, threatens, and strides magnificently forward, refusing to pay a bribe to these people. He is leonine and proud; one cannot help admiring him. The arguments against Maldon's epic heroic tendencies depend solely upon claims of the impossibility of epic heroic art having survived so intact for so many years. What is forgotten is that this poet is an artist, and, with the eye of an artist, has created a superior work of art by using the contrast to create his poem. The very sounds of his chosen words graphically display the difference between the warrior of his "now" and the older battle-proud warrior of his past. Byrhtnoth's speeches ring with enthusiasm. "Tō hēanlic mē pinceth paet gē mid ūrum sceattum to scype gangon unbefohtene, nū gē pus feor hider on ūrne eard in becōmon" (ll. 55-58). The enthusiasm and artistic merit of his words emphasize his heroic stature. They also serve to emphasize the socio-political and religious background of the poet's time.

Another of the debates over The Battle of Maldon is the question of Byrhtnoth's "ofermōd" or great pride. How could the poet present a hero of such stature, and have him lose his life, the lives of his comitatus, and a battle due to poor

judgment? In order to satisfy this question, one must, at the same time, answer the question of the poem's Christianity, for it is because Byrhtnoth is not only a Christian hero but also somewhat a Christian martyr that his "ofermōd" works.

Cecily Clark in "Byrhtnoth and Roland: A Contrast" insists that "Roland is explicitly, emphatically, Christian where Maldon is not." Her justification for this claim is the lack of direct reference to Christianity by any of the characters in the poem. Her conclusion is that

> the poet could not deny his hero's Christianity, nor presumably would he even have wished to do so; but the slightness and vagueness of his references to it compel us to the conclusion that he was playing it down, in order to depict Germanic heroism with the more purity. (292)

Yet when Byrhtnoth is about to die, he utters a thankful prayer to God (lines 173-80) and asks that his soul "pass in peace into the keeping of the Lord of angels unassailed by demons" (Swanton 171). He then dies. Byrhtnoth is not only a Christian, but a Christian dying in "heathen" hands--circumstantially, a martyr's death.

Before his prayer, in his final struggle, Byrhtnoth drops his sword and is unable to wield it further:

> Fēoll pā tō foldan fealohilte swurd:
> ne mihte hē gehealdan heardne mēce,
> waēpnes wealdan. Pā gȳt paet word gecwaeth
> hār hilderinc, hyssas bylde,
> baed gangan forth gōde gefēran. (ll. 166-71)

Beowulf and Guthlac each come to a final battle without swords. "Like Beowulf . . . Guthlac fights alone . . .

enhancing his heroic stature; also like Beowulf he will relinquish the aid of a sword--but not to prove his own singular strength, but rather his assurance of God's strong aid" (Swanton 149). The Maldon poet, with his medieval love of convolution, simultaneously makes Byrhtnoth the hero and the Christian martyr.

> Suffering has always been written into the heart of the Christian religion. Jesus Christ, for whatever reason, died an agonizing death. He was a victim . . . Later, the persecutions endured by the early Christians at the hands of the Roman Empire reinforced the message of suffering and its exaltation in the Christian mind. The cult of suffering and self-sacrifice has remained embedded in the Western world. It differs from the appreciation of bravery that one finds in other cultures because of the idealization of failure and the victim. (Armstrong 189)

Byrhtnoth's battle "blunder," that of allowing the Vikings across the Pante, functions if he can be considered a martyr. He must suffer. He must face the ultimate challenge, not in spite of the fact that this test could have been avoided, but because it could have been avoided. However,

> the confrontation at Maldon is patriotic rather than religious; within the poem at least, Byrhtnoth is first AEthelred's thegn (ll. 53, 151, 203) and only secondarily a Christian. His attitude is very different from that of, for example, the Christ-like, royal saint Edmund who cast down his weapons in order to suffer passive martyrdom at the hands of the Danes in 869. Byrhtnoth goes down fighting. (Swanton 171)

Beowulf chooses not to use his sword in order to display his superior strength. Guthlac chooses to trust in God's might, rather that his own. Byrhtnoth stands without his sword,

physically powerless in the face of his battle, praising God and encouraging his men, both hero and martyr. He never stops attempting to destroy the Vikings, using his leadership when his body fails. Byrhtnoth is not primarily a Christian martyr, but a political martyr.

Interestingly, Armstrong's "idealization of failure and the victim" finds a powerful parallel in old heroic attitudes.

> It is worth noting that the calamities of heroic poetry are seldom treated in a truly tragic spirit. What happens in Roland or Maldon. . .is indeed a gigantic disaster, but not of the same kind as happens in King Oedipus or King Lear. First, when Roland or Byrhtnoth falls after a furious fight, we do not have the same sense of utter desolation and waste that we have in authentic tragedy. It is true that the heroes' efforts may well have been futile, that their armies are destroyed and their enemies triumphant. It is also true that they seem to be caught, often through their own decisions, in a web of disaster from which there is no honourable escape but death. But, even allowing for all this, their deaths are somehow an occasion for pride and satisfaction. We feel not only that their lives are not given in vain, since they have set an example of how a man should behave when he has to pass the final ordeal of manhood, but that by choosing this kind of death he sets a logical and proper goal for himself. (Bowra 75-6)

The Maldon poet, then, was able to combine heroism and martyrdom in Byrhtnoth's actions. Cecily Clark is targeting superficial appearances and ignoring the larger aspect of the poem. One of the aspects of the old Germanic tradition that allowed Christianity to be accepted in the first place was the easy way heroic behavior meshed with the Christian patristic attitudes of saints and martyrs. The poet would have no reason to minimize or negate Christianity for by this time an

English hero would, by definition, be a Christian. Yet Germanic heroism is, by any standards, an anachronism to this poet. He is using an archaic art-form, and reason asserts that it must be for some purpose of his own. In order to discover this purpose, one must consider the poet and England at this time.

In the poem, there are two major decisions made by Byrhtnoth. In one of these decisions he allows the Vikings across the Pante. His motivation for this decision, whether correct or not, was both epic heroic and the action of a Christian martyr. The second crucial decision was to refuse tribute, choosing to pay with swords rather than with goods. Stanley Greenfield states that Byrhtnoth's refusal to pay tribute is merely an ironic repetition of the Vikings' demand "and does not generate further implications of meaning" (55). The political factors of the time, however, do indeed generate implications far beyond "ironic repetition." Had he (Byrhtnoth) chosen to pay the Vikings, he would have prevented the battle. He and his men would have lived. By choosing the "honorable" way, the way of battle and ultimately death, he chose the heroic path. Ironically, while Byrhtnoth refuses to pay Danegeld in the name of his lord, AEthelred, AEthelred himself chooses to pay. A rebuke against the disastrous weakness of the king is strongly implied. The juxtaposition of heroic eorl and somewhat less than heroic lord must have motivated the poet in writing his poem. Therefore, not only

must the Christian-pagan aspects be considered, but the heroic-expedient aspects must also have their place in interpreting Maldon.

C. S. Lewis has stated that the medieval mind, being subject to a great many disparate ideas, recognized "both an urgent need and a glorious opportunity for sorting out and tidying up" (11). The Maldon poet has done this sorting and tidying in a magnificent, incredible way. Within the poem, elements pagan and Christian, political and personal, are interwoven in a single tapestry that is the tenth century. It would be a terrible mistake to consider any single word, any single idea of Maldon at the expense of the other components.

The poet has succeeded in presenting the nostalgically simple idea of epic heroism, where an individual knew what was expected of him, against the increasingly complex background of tenth century England. An individual's loyalties were more complex. Loyalty must be given to an unseen, probably unknown national king, rather than to a local lord participating daily in the individual's life, experiencing the same problems and the same successes. The reformed Christian church (as described in Chapter Three) demanded a different attitude. Individual glory no longer held sway as the ultimate goal because Christian behavior demanded selflessness. The poet considers Byrhtnoth from the viewpoint of the Church. Byrhtnoth behaved in a manner well-suited to the old patristic

martyrs and saints. He refused to back down from his chosen course, refused to pay Danegeld. He chose to break rather than bend. But Christianity in later tenth century England had a new standard of excellence. Patience and endurance, poverty and obedience were the new superlatives. The Church was wending its way out of a time of almost secular behavior, a time of powerful abuses to Christian doctrine. Byrhtnoth's actions were presented with both the old Church and new in mind. As with the political and literary aspects of the poem, there is a dual approach to its Christianity.

The next of the major issues of contention concerning Maldon is its historic authenticity. It seems self-evident that the poet's actual description of the battle is more poetic than historical, but there is no question that, by considering the "big picture," Maldon is indeed historically authentic. It is with an understanding of this authenticity that the poet's skill becomes evident. Without question Byrhtnoth is a hero; ironically, more of a hero than his lord king, AEthelred. Yet behind this fairly simple ironic juxtaposition lies a more subtle criticism. The Maldon poet presents Byrhtnoth's epic heroism in a questionable light. The anachronistic style he uses gives a nostalgic cast to the picture of this old-fashioned hero, but, the poet gives his admiration a twist. Byrhtnoth is an epic hero, but epic heroism does not work any more. The world has become too complex, and the drives and reasons of the old kind of hero

are far too simple and ineffective in a new England. Byrhtnoth displays "ofermōd" and invites the Vikings across the Pante, dies gloriously, and forces the good men with him to die, in ironic tribute to a lost age that could not hold its own against the complexities of AEthelred's time.

The political climate was confusing, and costly, and freedom was being lost by small landowners due to their inability to pay appropriate shares of Danegeld. Feudalism was beginning to make itself felt, changing the attitude of individuals, creating the beginnings of a class system. This change in personal standing was as damaging to the old "hero and comitatus" as the reformed Church. In yet another way, Byrhtnoth's battle was nostalgic. The poet has examined Byrhtnoth's actions in light of these socio-political developments to create another juxtapositioning of disparate elements. He has examined these developments from the standpoint of epic heroic behavior and found both new and old attitudes to be wanting. Byrhtnoth is a political martyr, dying with his men for an ironically misinterpreted cause. The Christian stands before the heathen in all his glory--and dies for his king and his God. Yet, aside from the political ironies of dying for AEthelred II, the "heathen" are already either converted or converting to Christianity.

It would have been impossible for the Maldon poet to have accomplished this literary masterpiece without having been exposed to a great deal of the literature available to him

through Alfred's efforts. Though there is no way to prove which works he was familiar with, it seems possible that he had been exposed to Alfred's translation of Boethius's Consolation of Philosophy. "After the Viking invasions there was the famous Alfredian renaissance of biblical and patristic studies in England. Thus, Anglo-Saxon writers of the eighth, ninth, and tenth centuries had easy access to the patristic writings" (Thundyil 93-94). If one can make this assumption, then the poet knew that "as often as a man receives the reward of fame for his boasting, the conscience that indulges in self-congratulation loses something of its secret merit" (Boethius 44-45).

Byrhtnoth's ultimate battles are not visible. He struggles as three disparate ideals, hero, Christian martyr, and political martyr, against a world both real and changing. Every age finds its own heroes and Byrhtnoth is the hero of several. Each aspect of his character faces some battle, trying and failing in each case. "For the mythological hero is the champion not of things become but of things becoming" (Campbell 337), and each of Byrhtnoth's personae is a harking back. Byrhtnoth is at the beginning of an age of introspective heroes and the end of an age of more simple ideals. The real battle is taking place under the poet's pen, and it is only by becoming aware of this real battle that all other debates about Maldon gain the perspective necessary to

recognize in Byrhtnoth the beginning of a different sort of hero.

The Maldon poet wrote a miraculous work. It has been said that each era finds its own hero, and Byrhtnoth is the hero of a time of change. His actions cannot be simply categorized as good or bad. He cannot be the simple hero of Beowulf's time. The heroic concept is changing; late tenth century heroic behavior is pivoting its concept of success. By the time of the Pearl poet's Sir Gawain, a hero's success would appear to be failure by the standards of epic heroism. Sir Gawain finds his major battle to be an internal one. In The Battle of Maldon the first steps are taken toward this change.

Appendix

Translation

The Battle of Maldon

1 * * * was broken,

2 Then he commanded some one of the young men to leave (his) horse

3 to drive it far and to keep going on foot,

4 to give thought to hands and to be of good courage.

5 When the kinsman of Offa first discovered this

6 that the earl would not tolerate slackness,

7 he let his beloved falcon fly from his hands toward the wood,

8 and he advanced to the battle.

9 by this one could perceive that the young man would not

10 grow weak in the combat when he took up arms.

11 In addition to him (Offa's kinsman), Eadric wished to stand by his chief,

12 his lord in battle; he began to carry

13 his spear forward to battle. He had a good purpose

14 as long as he was able to hold with his hands

15 shield and broad sword; he fulfilled his vow
16 when he was supposed to fight before his lord.
17 Then Byrhtnoth began to arrange the warriors there,
18 he rode and instructed, he directed the men
19 how they had to stand and hold that position,
20 and he bade that they should hold their shields correctly
21 firmly with their hands, and that they should not become frightened at all.
22 When he had arranged the army properly,
23 he dismounted among the people where (to) him most pleasing was,
24 where he knew his band of household retainers most loyal.
25 Then stood on shore, sternly called out
26 Viking messenger words spoke
27 who threateningly announced Viking
28 message to earl where he on other stood.
29 "I am sent to you (from) bold seamen
30 commanded to say that you may quickly send
31 rings for protection and (for) you better is
32 that you this spear-rush with tribute buy off
33 than we so fierce battle (take) part
34 not need we us destroy if you be so wealthy;
35 we are willing to secure peace for the gold
36 if you who rule, that here are powerful
37 that you your people will ransom

to give (to) seamen of themselves the choice (according to their own terms)
money for peace and receive peace from us,
we are willing with that treasure to ship go
on water travel, and you peace hold."
Byrhtnoth spoke, shield lifted up
slender ash spear, spoke with words
angry and resolute, gave him an answer:
"You hear, seafarer, what this folk saith
they will you (as) tribute give spears
poison point and old swords
that army gear for you in battle not avail.
Viking messenger, announce back again
Tell your people much hateful narrative,
that here stands undisgraced nobleman with his company,
that will defend this homeland,
Ethelred's land, my lord
people and land: fall shall
heathens in battle! Too humiliating (poorly) to me seems
that you with our coins to ship go
unopposed, now that you this far hither
on our earth, in become.
not shall you easily treasure get hold of
we shall point and edge first reconcile,
grim battle-play, before we tribute give."
Commanded them shields to bear warriors to go

63 until they on that riverbank all stood.
64 Notable because of water (one) band not (get) to the other;
65 the tide came flowing there after the ebb
66 locked water-stream. Too long it (to) them seemed.
67 until the time when they together spears bear.
68 Themselves there Pantan stream with battle array stood
69 Eastsaxon point and the Viking army.
70 Not able they anyone (the) others injure
71 unless someone through arrow's flight death receive.
72 That flood-tide out departed. The sailors stood ready,
73 Viking many battle eager.
74 Commanded that hero lord hold that bridge
75 warrior fierce in battle--that was called Wulfstān-
76 Valiant among his kin: that was Ceola's son,
77 who that first man with his spear struck down
78 who in that place boldly on that bridge advanced
79 there stood with Wulfstan warriors undaunted
80 AElfhere and Maccus, courageous two,
81 who not wish from that ford take to flight
82 but they resolutely with the enemy company
83 as long as they weapons wielded could
84 when they that understood and clearly perceived
85 that they there bridge guard fierce found,
86 began use guile then hostile strangers,

87 asked then they access to the land obtain pass were permitted
88 over the ford go, foot troops lead.
89 Then the earl began because of his great pride
90 to give land (too) much to hateful people.
91 Began (to) shout then over cold (fateful) water
92 Byrntelm's son (Byrhtnoth)--warriors listened--
93 "Now the way is open to you. Come quickly to us,
94 (as) men to battle. God alone knows (Ah!)
95 who that battlefield control be permitted."
96 Advanced the slaughter-wolves, for water not cared about,
97 Viking army westward across (the) Pante,
98 across shining water shields carried,
99 sailors to the land shields (of lindenwood) (they) bore.
100 There opposite fierce (men) ready stood
101 Byrhtnoth with warriors. He with shields commanded
102 make that shield-wall and (ordered) the army to hold (that formation)
103 fast against the enemy. Then was battle near.
104 glory in battle. The time was come
105 that there (in that place) fated men should fall.
106 In that place came to be outcry raised up, ravens circled,
107 eagle carrion eager. On earth there was uproar.
108 They let then out of (their) hands spears hard as a file (sharpened by a file).

ground (sharpened) spears fly.
Bows were busy, shield received point.
Bitter was the battle. Warriors
fell on either hand, young warriors lay dead.
Wounded was Wulfmaēr, slaughter-bed chose,
kinsman of Byrhtnoth; he with swords was,
his (Byrhtnoth's) sister's son; fiercely cut down.
Then were Vikings requital given back.
Heard I that Eadweard one killed
fiercely with his sword, stroke not withheld,
so that at his feet fell doomed warrior;
with respect to that (to) him his lord thanks said,
(to) that bower-thane, when he opportunity had.
So stood firm, resolute
young warriors in battle, intent eagerly
who then among the battle-line first was able
fated man's life win
warrior with weapons. The slain fell to the earth;
they stood steadfast.
Exhorted them Byrhtnoth,
Bade that young warriors each be intent on battle
with (the) Danes would glory achieve.
Mad that fierce warrior, weapon up raised
shield for protection, and toward that warrior (Byrthnoth) advanced.
Advanced thus resolute earl to that churl.

133 Each of them (to the) other meant harm.
134 Sent then that Viking southern spear
135 so that wound happened (to the) warrior lord.
136 Then he thrust with (the rim of) his shield in such a way that the shaft broke and (he thereby) made
137 the spear (point) spring in such a way that it sprang back (out of the wound).
138 The war chief was maddened; he with spear stabbed
139 bold Viking that (to) him wound gave.
140 Wise was this warrior; he let his spear go
141 through the man's neck, hand guided
142 so that he on that sudden attackers (far seeker's) life reached.
143 Then he another with haste pierced
144 so that one coat of mail splitted; he was in breast wounded
145 through the linked rings, it in heart stopped
146 deadly point. The earl was the blither,
147 (he) laughed, that courageous man, told God thanks
148 this day's work that (to) him Lord granted.
149 Let the one Viking warrior, a spear from (his) hand,
150 fly from (his) fist, so that it too deeply
151 through that glorious AEthelred's thane.
152 By his (the earl) side stood young warrior not fully grown,
153 youth in battle, who very valiantly

154 plucked out of that warrior (the) bloody spear,
155 Wulfstane's son, Wulfmaēr the young,
156 let very hard (spear) go back again;
157 point in traveled then on the earth laid
158 that one whom (had) before grievously pierced his lord.
159 Went then yet another Viking to the earl;
160 he wanted that warrior's armlets to take,
161 armor and rings and ornamented sword.
162 Then Byrhtnoth drew sword from sheath
163 broad and bright-bladed, and on that coat of mail struck.
164 Too swiftly himself stopped (by) one seafarer,
165 when he that earl's arm wounded.
166 Fell then to earth, gold-hilted sword;
167 not able he (to) hold hard sword,
168 weapon wield. He yet that word spoke
169 hoary warrior, young men encouraged,
170 bade go forth good companions.
171 Not able then on feet longer firmly stand.
172 He to heaven looked.
173 "(I) thank thee, Lord (of) people,
174 for all that joy that I in world experienced.
175 Now I have, merciful Creator, greatest necessity
176 that thou mine spirit good grant
177 that mine soul may travel to thee
178 in thine power, prince of angels,
179 with peace depart. I am desirous from thee

180 that the hell-enemy not be allowed (to) humiliate."
181 Then himself cut down (by) heathen warriors
182 and both the warriors that by him stood
183 Aelthnōd and Wulmaēr both lay,
184 then close by their lord life (they) gave.
185 They retreat then from battle who in that place did not wish (to) be.
186 There became Odda's son first in flight
187 Godrīc from (the) battle, and that good (man) abandoned
188 who (to) him many often horse gave;
189 he leaped upon that war-horse that his lord owned
190 in those trappings which it was not right (for him to mount on)
191 and both his brothers with him galloped
192 Godwine and Godwīg, not care about battle
193 but turned from the battle and that forest set out for,
194 fled to that safe place and their lifes saved,
195 and men more than it any fitness was (than was at all fitting),
196 if they their favors all remembered
197 that he (Byrhtnoth) (to) them benefit did
198 so (to) him Offa on a day formerly asked
199 in that meeting place, when he meeting had,
200 that there many spoke bravely
201 then afterwards at need would not hold out.
202 Then became fallen the people's lord

AEthelred's earl: all hearth-companions
saw that their master lay dead.
Then there went forth proud followers
undaunted men hastened eagerly
they wished the second of two (things);
life give up or dear (leader) avenge,
thus he encouraged onward, son of AElfric,
(a) warrior years young words spoke,
AElfwine then said, he courageously spoke:
"Remember those times that we often at mead spoke,
when we on bench boast raised,
heroes in hall, about fierce warfare.
Now (one) can find out who may be brave.
I wish my noble line (to) all make known
that I was in Mercian great family;
my grandfather Ealhelm was called
wise ealdorman, blessed with this world's goods.
Not should me among that people reproach
that I wish (to) go from this army,
to go home, now that my lord lies dead
cut down in battle. (To) me is the grief greatest
he was both my kinsman and my lord."
Then he forth went, revenge remembered,
then he with point one reached
sailor of that people, then he (Viking) on earth lay
killed with his weapon; began then (he) to urge,

229 friends and companions, that they forth go.
230 Offa spoke, spear (of ash wood) shook;
231 "Lo, you, AElfwine, have all exhorted
232 followers to what is necessary. Now our lord lies dead,
233 earl on earth there is need for us all
234 that of us everyone encourage the other
235 warrior to battle, then as long as he weapon can
236 hold and keep, hard sword
237 spear and good sword. For us Godrīc has,
238 cowardly son of Odda, all betrayed;
239 Believe therefore too many a man that he on horse rode,
240 on that proud horse, (believed) that it was our lord.
241 For that reason here on the battlefield the army was divided,
242 shield-wall broke. Fail his undertaking
243 that he caused so many men to be put to flight!"
244 Lēofsunu spoke and his shield (of linden wood) raised,
245 shield to protect; he that man answered:
246 "I this promise, that I from here will not
247 flee (the) space of a foot, but will further advance
248 avenge in battle my friendly lord.
249 Steadfast heroes about Stūrmer not need me
250 words reproach, now my friendly lord has fallen in battle,
251 that I lordless home travel
252 (that I) turn from the battle, but I should weapon take,

point and iron." He full angry advanced,
fought suddenly, flight he scorned,
Dunnere then spoke, javelin brandished,
an honest man, over all called out,
bade that each of the warriors Byrhtnoth revenge;
"Not can by no means he hesitate who plans avenge (for the)
lord of the people, not for life care about."
Then they forward went, cared they not about life;
Began the household retainers fiercely (to) fight,
fierce spear-bearers, and God emplored
that they might avenge their friendly lord
and on their enemies death make.
The hostage began eagerly (to) help them,
he was from a brave Northumbrian family,
Ecglāf's son; his name was Aescferth.
He did not hesitate by no means at the combat,
but he shot forth arrows often;
at times he shot at a shield, at times wounded (someone),
ever and anon during a time he gave a wound,
then while he weapon was able wield.
Still in the front lines stood Ēadweard the tall
ready and eager, boasting (words) spoke
that he not would flee a foot's length (of) land
backwards turn, since his lord lay dead.

277 He broke the Danish line (shield-wall) and fought hand to hand with individual Danes.
278 until he his treasure-giver on those seamen
279 honorably avenged, before he among the slain lay.
280 So did AEthelrīc, noble companion,
281 ready and eager to advance (he) fought earnestly.
282 Sībyrht's brother, and very many another
clove shield edge, and the byrnie sang
285 a terrible song. Then in battle Offa struck
286 the Viking, so that he to earth fell,
287 and there kinsman of Gadd (Offa) sought the ground.
288 Quickly happened in battle Offa cut down;
289 he had nevertheless accomplished what he (to) his master promised,
290 as he vowed earlier with his ring-giver,
291 that they should both into the fortress ride,
292 unharmed to (their) home, or in army fall in battle,
293 in place of slaughter wounded die;
294 he lay dead as a thane ought to near his lord.
295 Then came about shields clash. Vikings advanced,
296 enraged by the fight; spear often pierced
297 the fated soul-house. Forward at that time went Wistān,
298 Thurstān's son, with those warriors fought,
299 he was in throng (of) them slayer (of) three
300 before himself, Wīgelin's son, on that earth lay.
301 There was harsh encounter; stood fast

302 warriors in battle; warriors fell
303 (of) wounds weary, (the) slaughter(ed) fell to the earth.
304 Ōswold and Ēadwold, all the while,
305 both the brothers, warriors exhorted,
306 friends and kinsmen words bade
307 that they there by necessity should hold out,
308 without weakening weapons make use of.
309 Byrhtwold discoursed, shield raised-
310 he was old retainer- (his) ash wood spear brandished;
311 he very boldly warriors instructed:
312 "Courage must be the stronger, heart the braver,
313 spirit must be greater as our strength lessens.
314 Here lies our lord all cut down
315 good (man) on the earth. Always will morn
316 he who intends now from this fighting to go.
317 I am old of life; away I will not (wish),
318 but I myself by (the) side of my lord,
319 by so beloved (a) man (to) lie intend."
320 In this fashion AEthelgār's son, Godrīc, exhorted
321 them to battle. Often he spear let,
322 deadly spear fly against the Vikings;
323 as he in that army first went,
324 hewed and laid low (enemies), until he in battle fell.
325 Was not (that not at all) that Godrīc who then fled from battle.

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